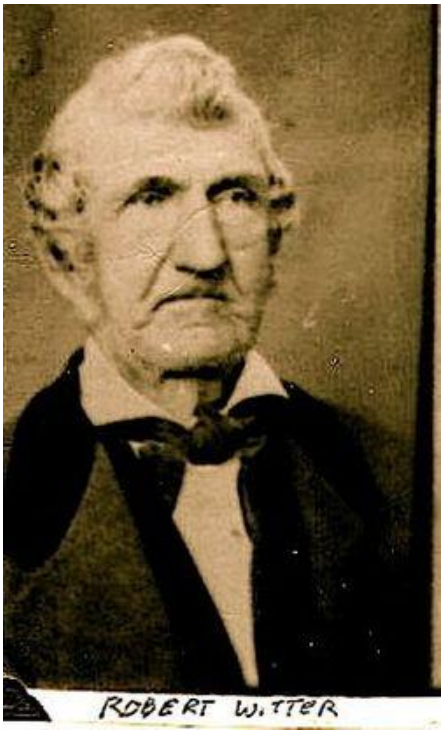
Robert Witter

1802–1887

A Pioneer of Green County, Wisconsin

By Daniel Witter



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Introduction

When I began writing Robert Witter's biography, I was like any other genealogist—I knew next to nothing about him. I had a photo and a little biographical information from my Aunt Madeline Witter, but that was all.

I often looked at his photo and I made some assumptions about Robert. After spending months researching his life, I found out most of those assumptions to be wrong.

A photo doesn't reveal a man's character. It doesn't tell you how he approached his life. Most importantly, it doesn't tell you why he made those particular choices.

Over time, the "why" is what I wanted to know about Robert the most.

I found no journals or letters from Robert explaining his thoughts. But his actions left a remarkable documentary record. Wherever possible, I have allowed those records to speak for him. When I draw conclusions about his character or motivations, they are based on documented actions rather than speculation.

Robert did so much more than I expected, and I learned so much more than I anticipated. It usually started with one small detail that snowballed into new discoveries. One detail led to another and another and so on. Hours passed before I realized how much time had gone by.

I discovered that Robert was a thoughtful man who didn't act rashly. He took risks, especially with real estate and his move from New York to Wisconsin. But he took risks based on years of knowledge and experience.

Once Robert found his place in Exeter, he stayed put and he invested himself by giving back and serving.

He was a postmaster.

He was a justice of the peace.

He was a witness, a guardian, a town supervisor, a county commissioner, and more.

He was someone I grew to care about because, in everything I found, there was no evidence that he expected anything in return.

I respect Robert for the life he lived. He wasn't perfect. Yet when he made decisions, he accepted responsibility for them and quietly lived a life that mattered to the people around him.

Illustration created with ChatGPT by OpenAI, 2026.

Every great journey begins with a few simple questions: What's out there? What awaits me beyond the beaten path?

Walking into the unknown terrifies some people, but others are driven to find answers. They leave their old world behind and venture into the unknown, their courage lighting the way like a flame.

This was Robert Witter in 1843. At 41 years old, Robert gambled on his future and struck out west with his family to build a new life in a community far from the home he had known. Much was at stake.[i]

His decision to leave would prove to be one of the defining moments of his life.

Robert didn't make this decision in haste. For nearly twenty years he bought and sold land, paid off mortgages, and gained experience in land and finance. By the time he began his westward journey to Wisconsin, Robert was adept at navigating the land system and ready to apply those skills on a new frontier.[ii]

Over the course of his life, Robert became much more than a farmer and landowner. He served as a county commissioner, justice of the peace, postmaster, attorney-in-fact for his brother, guardian, and witness.[iii]

But this was only part of who he was. Through the years, as Robert invested himself in the community, he endeared himself to others who grew to know and respect him.

"Of a genial disposition, apparently always happy, with devoted tenderness," his obituary stated, describing his personality. "Social in his nature, fond of a good joke and a hearty laugh, his doors were ever hospitably open; no amount of company seemed too much for him, yet he seldom sought society away from home."[iv]

Robert found a home among the people, the farms, the rolling hills and pastures surrounding Exeter.

"Energetic, he did with his might what his hands found to do, and expected those about him to do the same, but such was the evenness of his temper, and the strength of his self-control, that one who knew him long and intimately said: 'I don't know that I ever saw him ruffled,'" his obituary stated. [v]

In matters of Robert's faith, little documented evidence survives. According to his obituary, Robert entered the Baptist church in Scipio, New York, at the age of sixteen.[vi] Despite searches of available databases, Robert's name has not yet been found in the Baptist membership rolls of Cayuga County.

Traditionally, the Witter family has its roots in congregational churches of New England.[vii] By the time Robert and Lorana settled in Green County, Wisconsin, their affiliation appears to have changed to the Methodist Episcopal Church where they remained lifelong members.[viii]

Robert's obituary recorded his political views:

"In politics he was from first to last a Democrat, save that at the elections he cast his ballot in favor of prohibition," the obituary stated. [ix]

Considering the trials and tribulations he encountered during his lifetime, Robert took a big gamble by moving to Wisconsin. He had no way of knowing what awaited him.

Robert's leap to Wisconsin wasn't the first major move within the larger Witter family. Perhaps the most consequential move in the family's history was that of his ancestor, William Witter and his wife, Hannah, who moved from England to the North American continent in 1629.[x] Robert's move represented one thread in a larger pattern of the Witter family's westward movement since William Witter's arrival.

After William's arrival, the family spent 40 years in Lynn, Massachusetts, before moving to eastern Connecticut. For the next 125 years, several Witter generations thrived there until Robert's grandfather, Capt. Ebenezer Witter, moved to Massachusetts in the 1790s. Robert's father Ebenezer Witter Jr. moved to Cayuga County, New York, around the same time. [xi]

So, Robert's story of westward movement was a continuation of a family story that extends the present day through his descendants. Each generation had its own series of moves, carrying the family further west, all the way up to the present day. The reasons for the family's moves aren't completely known, but they circle around land, opportunity, work, family, or necessity.

Robert's story started in Scipio, Cayuga County, New York. Born July 20, 1802, to Revolutionary War veteran Ebenezer Witter Junior and his wife Zerviah Spaulding, Robert was the eighth of 12 children and the sixth son.[xii]

Robert belonged to one of the first generations of Witters born as citizens of the United States rather than British subjects.

Robert's parents were originally from Preston, Connecticut, and settled in Scipio in the 1790s following the end of the Revolutionary War.[xiii]

Scipio was situated in rolling countryside between Owasco Lake to the east and Cayuga Lake to the west. The area was known as the Finger Lakes region due to several long, slender lakes running north and south like fingers. Lake Ontario sat some ninety miles to the north. The nearest large town was Auburn, which was about ten miles north of Scipio.

It was here that Robert grew to manhood. Little is known about Robert's upbringing directly, but much can be inferred from the world in which he grew up. He was likely educated at home along with his siblings and taught the essentials of farming at the same time he learned to read and write.

The family's livelihood depended on each member of the family knowing and doing their part.

In a rural farming community like Scipio, land was not an abstract idea. It was part of daily conversation and local identity: who owned which lot, who sold to whom, who mortgaged a farm, who bought adjoining acreage, and who moved west. Robert likely grew up hearing the practical language of acres, boundaries, roads, neighbors, payments, and obligations.

Robert grew to manhood during a time when migration and the search for opportunity became a defining feature of American life. Robert likely spent part of his youth watching others travel west. Roads and migration routes extended westward, connecting towns like Scipio to communities farther west.

This was an important time for Robert. He met Lorana Rood and they later married on January 15, 1822. Lorana was the daughter of James and Elizabeth Rood. Robert and Lorana had eleven children, several of whom died in infancy.[xiv]

In 1823, Robert took one of his first documented steps into adulthood when he purchased property in Auburn for $325. This transaction marked the beginning of Robert's long pattern of land acquisition, sale, and mortgage activity. These acquisitions and sales eventually encompassed dozens of transactions across five counties and two states over his adult lifetime.[xv]

The records do not preserve Robert's private thoughts from these years, but they show the habits he was forming. In Cayuga County, he appeared repeatedly in deeds and mortgages, showing his familiarity with the system in which land could be bought, sold, financed, and secured. By the time his activity extended into Genesee and Wyoming Counties, Robert was not simply moving from one farm to another. He was operating within a wider property system, buying, selling, and mortgaging land across multiple communities.

Robert eventually turned his eyes to western New York. By 1835, records place Robert in Covington, Genesee County, about one hundred miles west of Scipio. An April 1, 1835 deed identifies Robert as being "of the same place" as his brother Chester, who was identified as a resident of Covington. Robert acquired substantial acreage there and continued buying, selling, and mortgaging property in the area over the following years.[xvi]

During those years, New York officials redrew county lines, and in 1841 Robert's property became part of the newly formed Wyoming County. This is why Robert's records appear in both Genesee and Wyoming counties during this time.[xvii]

As mentioned above, Robert began his land purchasing activity young with his first purchase in Cayuga County, New York. The records don't tell us what his motivations were at the time. For example, did he intend to be a simple farmer and raise crops, or did he have a vision of eventually buying and selling land to supplement his income? The surviving records offer no direct answer. They preserve Robert's transactions, but not his private thoughts. What they do reveal, however, is how his relationship with land evolved over the following four decades.[xviii]

Rather than settling permanently and farming on one plot of land, Robert bought, sold, and mortgaged property, slowly building up his experience and the skills he would later take with him to western New York and Wisconsin.

Between 1823 and 1829, Robert's land activity expanded as he acquired property and increasingly made use of mortgages and other forms of credit.

The record shows Robert becoming increasingly experienced in navigating and using New York's land system to his benefit.

These weren't tiny land transactions. In 1823 he purchased property in Auburn for $325, in 1825 he acquired about 110 acres in Scipio, and in 1829 he purchased another 75 acres. Together, these purchases represented thousands of dollars in land transactions, a considerable sum for a young husband and father who was establishing himself.[xix]

These early purchases don't prove Robert intended to become a land investor. But they show a pattern he would follow for the remainder of his life. To Robert, land was more than a place to farm. It became a means to build opportunity and further expand his holdings.

One of Robert's most significant purchases in Cayuga County was from Asahel Fitch and Martha Fitch near Scipio. Robert purchased 75 acres on April 15, 1829, for $2,925. To finance the purchase, Robert and Lorana executed a mortgage with William Close the same day. Together, these two transactions demonstrate Robert's growing willingness to use credit to acquire land, and a method he would turn to again in his future land dealings.[xx]

The transaction foreshadowed Robert's future use of mortgages to finance land purchases.

At this point in his life, Robert was no longer concerned only with buying, selling, and managing his own lands. He turned to loaning funds to others. The record notes one particular transaction in which Robert advanced funds to a man named Elias Bond and received a mortgage securing the debt.

This transaction stated that Robert provided Elias Bond $1,236.45 and received a mortgage securing the debt on April 1, 1836. It is one of the first recorded instances in which Robert served in this kind of role.[xxi]

Robert's last known documented New York land transaction occurred on April 21, 1842, when he and Lorana sold a sixty-acre tract in the Town of Middlebury, Wyoming County, to William Bainbridge for $1,500.[xxii]

Nearly 20 years had passed since Robert made his first documented purchase in Cayuga County. During that time, he gained experience through purchasing, selling, mortgaging, and financing land acquisitions. Those experiences prepared him for the challenges and opportunities that awaited him in Wisconsin.

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Robert was shaped by his experiences, and the wisdom he gained guided him in his decisions. One of the easiest places to see this is with his land purchases.

Robert was not the typical farmer who spent a life farming the same fields. He was interested in acquiring land. In all, Robert held 36 documented properties totaling between 3,500 and 4,500 acres across two states and five counties. This is only an estimate because some of the lands were city lots and acreage totals were not provided or specified.[xxiii]

Encapsulating Robert's land transactions is difficult. In Green County, Wisconsin, alone he held 24 deeds over the 40 years he lived there totaling more than 1,000 acres. They were not held all at once, but often as many as five or six properties at a time. It's not known if he actually farmed all of these lands, leased or rented them, or held them fallow for the sole purpose of selling them. Some of those deeds were for properties with just a few acres. Others were several hundred acres. Some, particularly in Green County, Wisconsin, were lots in communities such as Monroe, Albany, and Exeter. Some lands he held for a few years; others he held for decades.[xxiv]

The records suggest the purchases were not random. He mortgaged some of these lands to leverage his existing properties to acquire more land.

The records don't state why Robert's gaze turned west to Wisconsin, nor did Robert leave behind a written explanation of his decision in his own words. It's also not clear how Robert learned about Wisconsin. He could have heard through word of mouth, advertising pamphlets, newspaper articles, or conversations with others who already went west.

But once Robert made his decision, he sold his land, loaded up his family, and made the long journey west.

Though much of Wisconsin remained only lightly settled by Europeans in 1843, Native Americans had lived there for thousands of years. French fur traders, missionaries, and explorers had traveled through the region since the 17th century, and permanent European settlements occurred in the early 1700s.[xxv]

There were several ways that Robert, Lorana and their family could have made the journey to Wisconsin. They could have traveled overland and passed south of the Great Lakes. Many others chose to travel through Buffalo, New York, and then by ship across the Great Lakes to southern Wisconsin. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 made this route faster and less expensive than traveling overland. No record is left of the path Robert and Lorana took.[xxvi]

Robert's move to Wisconsin was a serious undertaking for its time, especially with a family of children, the youngest of them being Eugene, who was just two years old. The family had to be well-provisioned with enough food and water to keep them going, especially if they were waylaid or if a tragedy occurred. Robert had to be capable enough to deal with threats, handle wagon repairs, deal with illnesses, and navigate his way through unfamiliar lands.

Wisconsin was organized as a territory in 1836 and Green County organized in 1837. Wisconsin didn't become a state until 1848, by which time Robert was setting down roots. At the time, roads were scarce, and settlements were far apart. The federal government operated a land office in Mineral Point where new settlers could purchase lands around the region ready for settlement. This led to the widespread development of the region over the following decades.[xxvii]

His family migration came at a pivotal time in Wisconsin history. The area had attracted explorers and settlers before it achieved statehood. Robert was not the first person to arrive there. The territory was established in 1836 and didn't become a state until 1848. Roads were still primitive, and towns were beginning to emerge from the forests and open prairie.

Robert never left an explanation as to why he chose Wisconsin rather than another state or territory. Land was cheaper, which may have been a consideration. The area was less developed and there was more opportunity to purchase lands than in New York. These fields were also fresh and never farmed by incoming settlers, unlike New York, where farming had taken place years before Robert was even born. In Wisconsin, a man and his family could start fresh and build something different than they had before.

Lead mining was booming in Green County at the time. So, the prospect of getting rich brought an influx of people looking to become wealthy. Robert, however, focused his attention on farming, land acquisition, and

community development. Within a few short years, the lead mining industry declined as word of the gold discovery in California in 1849 gave way to the California Gold Rush. Many left the area and never returned, but Robert stayed. Agriculture took over as the primary county industry.[xxviii]

But Robert arrived in an area where development was nearly non-existent. Though he was not the first, Robert and his brother Chester were early settlers. Looking at the records, it appears that Robert was interested in community creation. This is reflected in all of his land purchases as early as 1843.

Sources place Robert's arrival in Wisconsin in or before 1843. The surviving Grant County records don't start with a deed. They begin with a mortgage and satisfaction of mortgage. The mortgage is dated August 22, 1843, for 240 acres. The satisfaction of the mortgage was November 17, 1845. The available records do not elaborate on his time there, nor do they state when he sold the Grant County land.[xxix]

Shortly after his arrival, Robert found himself in one of the county's more unusual and disturbing events of its time. Following the murder of Green County resident Author Smith in August 1844, Robert was selected to serve on a jury investigating Smith's death.[xxx]

Wisconsin territorial law was different from today. Suspicious deaths were investigated by a jury assembled for an inquest rather than law enforcement investigators or medical examiners.[xxxi]

The incident is told in the *History of Green County* on pages 244–245 through a personal account by J. R. Cocker. Cocker describes the victim, Author Smith, as a well-liked man and farmer near Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin. Citizens thought that Smith disappeared because no one thought such a well-liked person could be the victim of a murder.

But some boys found Smith's oxen still in yoke, and reported it to others.

"The whole country was alarmed and turned out en masse," Cocker wrote in his account. "One of the Pierce boys mounted a horse, alarmed Monroe (a city in Green County) and went down to Uncle Tom Bowen's. A crowd turned out, George West among others."

Smith's body was discovered down a steep bank, on wet ground and in tall grass, Cocker stated.

"Then when his skull was found the horrible truth dawned on them that Smith had been murdered instead of being lost," Cocker wrote. The suspected motive was $200 Smith had in a chest in his house.

This is where Robert enters the story. Cocker stated that Robert was empaneled with others "to hold an inquest on the remains." Cocker mentions that Robert "kept" a tavern in Exeter.

"I will now state that Robert Whitter and Gabe Long tied handkerchiefs over their mouths and with the aid of long sticks rolled Smith's remains on a sheet and the whole was put into a box for interment," wrote Cocker.

"The skull was taken over to the tavern and also the ax. The jury after a short session at the house of Stedman adjourned over to the tavern, kept by Robert Whitter, in the village of Exeter. I was at this examination myself; it was at night. By this time suspicion had pretty well settled on William Boyls."

A man named William Boyls was later tried in Monroe, but not convicted and was set free.[xxxii]

Following the investigation, Robert continued to build his land holdings in the area.

On May 1, 1845, the federal government issued Robert a patent for 80 acres in Green County following his earlier purchase of the land through the government land office at Mineral Point, Wisconsin.[xxxiii]

Robert left no writings about his early impressions of Wisconsin. But the fact that he chose to live there the rest of his life and immerse himself in community life tells us a lot about Robert as a person and how he felt about being there.

When Robert purchased land in Green County, he built a sawmill for his brother, Chester. The plot is described as the west half of the southeast quarter of Section 7, Township 3 North, Range 8 East. The city of Monticello, Wisconsin now sits on a significant portion of that land.[xxxiv]

The *History of Green County, Wisconsin,* says this about the plot:

"In 1845, Robert Witter built a saw-mill on Little Sugar River, in the Western part of Mount Pleasant. The mill was built for his brother Chester Witter, who soon sold it, however, to Mr. Steadman, by whom it was sold to Mr. Truman."

Robert left no explanation as to why he chose to build a sawmill versus becoming a farmer. There was timber available and a ready water source in the Little Sugar River.

During his first years in Green County, Robert purchased lands like he did in New York. These land purchases appear to be clustered in several areas. Robert obtained several city lots within the city of Monroe, some property near Mount Pleasant, and the remainder in and around Exeter.[xxxv]

Among some of these Exeter properties were several lots laid out on a planned city plat map for Exeter. Robert purchased several lots, but the town never materialized. Whatever development took place in Exeter for buildings and business at the time has vanished as today Exeter is mostly a crossroads with a nearby cemetery. Most of the county growth took place in Monroe, Brodhead, and other towns.[xxxvi]

It's not clear if Robert built the mill alone or with help from Chester or others. The property was sold on February 27, 1845, to A. F. Stedman. No further discussion exists about Robert and Chester's involvement in the sawmill. Chester eventually moved out of the area, but Robert remained in Exeter and turned his attention to land purchases.[xxxvii]

Significant changes occur in the record of Robert's Green County affairs. Deeper details emerge in a way that is not reflected in New York. In New York, Robert's life and activities are revealed through land transactions and deals. In Green County, Robert does more than just buy and sell land. He becomes deeply engaged in community building, not by building structures, but building relationships with his fellow settlers.

A different side of Robert emerges from the Wisconsin records. Robert moves beyond obtaining and selling land. The records show a man who begins to take up positions of trust in various forms shortly after he arrived. He served in legal capacities and as a witness to his neighbors' transactions **and** in public office.

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One of the earliest records of Robert in public office appears on page 466 in the *History of Green County, Wisconsin* (1884), where he is listed among those elected as Green County commissioners, receiving 148 votes. It's possible that Robert sought other county offices in his lifetime, but this is the earliest documented election I have found in which he is listed.[xxxviii]

The Green County Board of County Commissioners was the principal governing body in Green County. In 1849, the commissioners established 15 towns in the county and their borders, though those borders were altered over time. The commissioners appointed election judges, designated where the district court was held, authorized payments from the county treasury, established election precincts, and conducted other administrative business of the county.[xxxix]

Although Robert did not set up Green County's original government, he was responsible for carrying the work forward.

Robert served as a county commissioner for one year.[xl] But his interest in public service was only getting started. His next place of interest was in his own home area, Exeter.

Exeter organized into a town in 1849 and its first election was held April 3, 1849, at the home of a man named L. D. Barnes. At that election, Robert was chosen to serve on the town's three-member Board of Supervisors and was selected as one of its two treasurers. Simultaneously, Robert was elected to be a justice of the peace.[xli]

In his role as an Exeter town supervisor, Robert worked with the other supervisors in administering the affairs of the town. Wisconsin law assigned town supervisors substantive responsibilities, including oversight of town accounts and highways. This was not a ceremonial position. More settlers were moving into Wisconsin and into Green County each year looking for a place to live and start a new life. Robert, through his work on the Board of Supervisors, was participating directly in Exeter's local government.[xlii]

Robert served in this critically important role for one year. At the same time, Robert's public service also extended to helping individuals on a more personal level.

One of the ways he did this was by becoming a justice of the peace. Elected to the office in 1849, Robert is documented serving in that capacity through at least 1856. His name appears in twelve land transactions preserved in the Green County deed records.[xliii]

Summarizing Robert's work as a justice of the peace is difficult because only a partial record of his activities in that office has been located. Much of the surviving evidence found so far comes from Green County deed books, where Robert repeatedly appears in his official capacity. However, I have not located Robert's court docket or the accompanying case papers he was required by law to maintain. Without those records, it is impossible to know the full range of matters that actually came before him. The Wisconsin statutes can tell us what authority his office carried, but not which of those powers Robert personally exercised.

As a justice of the peace, Robert Witter was a local judicial officer authorized under Wisconsin law to preside over a court of limited jurisdiction. His responsibilities potentially included both civil and criminal matters, although the surviving statutes alone do not establish which of these duties Robert actually performed or how frequently he performed them.

On the civil side, a justice could hear and determine certain disputes involving debts, contracts, damages, trespass, possession of personal property, forcible entry and detainer, and other matters falling within statutory monetary and jurisdictional limits. A justice could receive pleadings and evidence, subpoena and swear witnesses, receive depositions, rule on certain procedural matters, conduct trials, and render judgments. Depending upon the case, either the justice himself or a jury could determine the outcome. The court could also issue legal process associated with attachments, garnishments, replevin, and enforcement of judgments. Certain judgments could eventually be filed with higher courts and become liens against real property.[xliv]

The Green County deed books provide twelve documented examples of Robert performing one of his official legal functions as justice of the peace.

The earliest deed-book record identified in this research showing Robert acting as justice of the peace dates to January 26, 1850**.** On that date, Robert acted in his official capacity as justice of the peace during the execution of a quitclaim deed transfer between Ezra and Temperance Durgin and Jacob Linge. Robert signed the acknowledgement as justice of the peace. In this role, Robert certified that the parties appeared before him, that he was satisfied they were the people named in the deed and that they voluntarily acknowledged and executed the deed.[xlv]

This was one of Robert's most frequently documented aspects of his job as justice of the peace. The deed records repeatedly place him in this role as his friends and neighbors appeared before him.

The Justice of the Peace office also carried criminal authority. Wisconsin law empowered justices to preserve the peace, receive sworn criminal complaints, examine complainants and witnesses, issue arrest warrants, set bail or order an accused person held pending proceedings, and hear criminal matters falling within their statutory jurisdiction. An accused person could be tried before the justice when a jury was waived or before a jury assembled under procedures supervised by the justice. If convicted, the justice could impose whatever fine or imprisonment the law prescribed for the particular offense. Assault, battery, and affray are specifically identified in the statute as offenses handled summarily before justices of the peace.[xlvi]

The deeds in which Robert appears provide no evidence of his judicial responsibilities over criminal cases. And no records have been located to clarify what, if any, cases Robert presided over.

The office also carried significant procedural and recordkeeping responsibilities. Justices could issue legal process, summon and swear witnesses, supervise juries, enter judgments, and perform other duties necessary to administer their courts. Wisconsin law also provided for these official records to pass to another justice when a justice left office. Robert's docket has not yet been located, leaving the full extent of his judicial work unknown.

An especially important responsibility was recordkeeping. A justice was required to maintain an official docket documenting proceedings before him and preserve affidavits and other case papers. The statutes required entries concerning such matters as parties, process, appearances, pleadings, witnesses, jurors, verdicts, judgments, executions and appeals. Testimony in certain proceedings also had to be recorded. Justices were required to maintain an alphabetical index of judgments.

These records were considered part of the continuing judicial system rather than the justice's private papers. When a justice left office, Wisconsin law directed his books and papers to pass to another justice or, under specified circumstances, through the town clerk.

Some proceedings also created records outside the justice's own docket. Appeals could result in docket transcripts and case papers being transmitted to county or circuit courts. Criminal convictions required certificates to be prepared and filed with the county clerk, and criminal appeals required records to be transmitted to the circuit court.[xlvii]

Beyond his governmental roles, Robert also served his community as a guardian, probate appraiser, witness, and attorney-in-fact for his brother.

Perhaps one of the better examples of this occurred in 1870, when Green County Judge Brooks Dunwiddie appointed Robert Witter to be a guardian of the estates of three minor heirs of a man named William Fletcher.

According to court documents, William died in 1863, but for unknown reasons the probate case wasn't presented to the court until 1870 by the children's mother Jane Fletcher. In the intervening years Jane raised and cared for three daughters: Emma J., Ellen M., and Sarah E. Since the children were still minors, the law required court approval to protect the children's inheritance.

Wisconsin law placed guardians such as Robert under court supervision when selling property belonging to minor wards. A guardian was required to obtain judicial authority for the sale and comply with safeguards intended to protect the children's property interests. Robert's surviving probate papers document that process in unusual detail. He furnished the required bond, arranged for notice of the sale, conducted the property sale at public auction, reported the result to the county court, and received judicial confirmation before completing the conveyance.[xlviii]

In 1870, Jane petitioned the court by letter to be appointed guardian for the children. Court documents stated she wanted to move the family to Minnesota and she wanted the properties to be sold "for the children's best interests of said infants."

The record doesn't show Judge Dunwiddie approving the request.

For reasons that are not clear, Judge Dunwiddie appointed Robert as guardian for the purpose of selling the lots. Robert was required to post a $300 bond as security for the faithful performance of his duties.

This was not just an act of selling land. Robert had to take an oath that he would fulfill the role, had to post a bond, advertise the sale of the lands in the *Green County Republican* newspaper, post notices in public places for three weeks, conduct an auction for the properties, present the price to the court for approval, and then convey the property after the court's approval.

The appointment carried significant responsibilities. The court relied on Robert to carry out every step of the process faithfully.

Robert completed the process and sold the lands to Nelson A. Hitchcock for $133.

Robert may have been compensated for his work, but there is no record of payment in the probate file.

In 1849, the Green County Court entrusted Robert and two other men to appraise the property of a man named George W. Smith.

To fulfill this role, Robert had to swear an oath that he would faithfully fulfill his responsibilities, inventory the estate, place a value on every article, certify the inventory, and return it to the court.

Robert was appointed on July 28, 1849, but didn't give his oath until a month later on September 1, 1849. He and the others carried out the appraisals the same day as the oath.

The appraisal wasn't limited just for George W. Smith. A separate appraisal was completed for his wife, Lucinda Smith. She was entitled to a portion of the property that was not to be used to satisfy claims by creditors. In this case, Robert and the others listed a wagon, horse, harness, plow, table, clock, and other items on Lucinda's appraisal.

Once the appraisals were completed, Robert and the others returned the documents to the court.[xlix]

Two years later, the court appointed Robert as an appraiser for a second time. This time it was for a much larger estate for Thomas L. Summers of Exeter. According to court records, Judge John A. Bingham of Green County Court appointed Robert, T. J. Safford and John Porter to serve as appraisers on July 14, 1851.

On July 16, the men swore the required oath before James Hair, justice of the peace.

Robert participated in a detailed judicial process that required judgment and enough standing in the community for the Probate Court to entrust him with valuing another citizen's estate.

It was no small task. It required Robert to take the required oath, inventory all real and personal property, assign a money value to each item, certify the inventory, and deliver it to Administrator James Hair.

This was not a quick appraisal completed in a single day. The inventory was taken from mid-July to early August 1851, suggesting a substantial estate that required a careful examination of property, livestock, tools, crops and real estate.

According to court records, the properties alone included an 80-acre tract, a 40-acre lot as well as town lots in block 12 and other fractional parcels. When the inventory was completed, Robert and the others turned it in for the court to make its determinations.

Unlike the George W. Smith appraisal, which had two separate inventories, the Thomas L. Summers estate required only one.[l]

By the middle of the 1850s Robert had served as a county commissioner, town supervisor, justice of the peace, probate appraiser, and witness. One form of public service, however, touched nearly every family in Exeter. On October 6, 1856, Robert accepted appointment as postmaster.[li]

Robert left no explanation for why he accepted the appointment, but he held the position from October 6, 1856 until John Porter was appointed as his successor on October 3, 1867, according to federal postal records.[lii]

One published source, *The History of Green County*, incorrectly states that Robert was the last postmaster of Exeter and that the post office closed in 1871.

It's also unclear if the office was in a store or its own building. In the 19th century, many post offices were small, often located in general stores, cheese factories, or private homes, according to the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society.[liii]

Like other postmasters of the period, Robert was required to execute a bond and take an oath of office before assuming his duties.[liv]

At the time, mail was delivered to the post offices by horse-drawn stagecoaches and wagons. Mail was also moved across the country by railroad.[lv]

According to delivery schedules posted in the *Monroe Sentinel* newspaper, deliveries were made three times per week — Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.[lvi]

As postmaster, Robert was responsible for receiving, sorting, and dispatching the mail, delivering letters to local residents, collecting postage, and maintaining the accounts and records required by the Post Office Department. He was also expected to monitor the mail service in his area and report irregularities or failures by mail contractors. These responsibilities were set out in detail by federal guidelines published in 1852 by the Office of the Postmaster General.[lvii]

According to the United States Postal Service publication *Postmasters in the 19th Century*, postmasters:
took an oath of office, including an oath to support the Constitution;
were required to post a bond;

- had to live in the community where their post office was located;
- at the great majority of offices—more than 90 percent—were appointed by the postmaster general rather than the President;
- at small offices were not salaried, but instead earned commissions based upon postage collected or cancelled;

- supplied the post-office space and equipment themselves at no cost to the government;
- frequently operated the post office as a sideline to another occupation, such as keeping a store;
- paid any hired help themselves;
- were required to maintain regular business hours;
- and often earned very little from the position. The USPS even notes that some men held the position from a sense of public duty so their community could have mail service.[lviii]

According to a federal site-location report dated November 15, 1862, the post office was located in the northeast quarter of Section 35, T4N R8E in Exeter Township. It is unclear whether this was in a store, Robert's home, or some other building.[lix]

A later federal postal route map from 1869 shows Exeter on a route between Monroe and Madison, indicating the corridor the community's mail service followed shortly after Robert's tenure.[lx]

Federal registers from 1863 and 1865 continued to list Robert as Exeter's postmaster and recorded both his compensation and balances due to the United States.[lxi]

Many postmasters purchased a town mark and then used their artistic ability to carve a killer from a cork, apple wood, pear wood, a rubber eraser, or even a potato.[lxii]

The postal route through Exeter was assigned different route numbers over time, including Routes 13192 and 13145, while continuing along essentially the same corridor.[lxiii]

Robert was postmaster at a time when rural home deliveries did not exist yet (not until 1896). So, on days when the mail was delivered, people arrived at the post office on foot, on horseback or by carriage, sometimes traveling from miles away just to get their mail.[lxiv]

When people came together to get their mail, this was more than an errand. The gatherings became small community events where people socialized, shared news, talked politics, and reconnected with family and friends.

The lives of people around Exeter focused on farming. From sun-up to sundown, people concentrated on feeding the livestock, milking the cows, fixing fences, mending clothes, planting crops, and completing the harvest. There wasn't much time to visit with family or neighbors, even those who lived close by. So, when people came together to meet up with Robert, it was more than just getting their mail. It was a time to reconnect and strengthen bonds. It was a lifeline for the community.

Sometimes it took weeks for mail to reach its destination, so some people arrived hopeful or maybe even anxious to hear news from family or friends. Robert stood behind the counter handing out mail and connected his neighbors and friends with the outside world.

All sorts of news and letters arrived: letters from distant family members, announcements of births and marriages, notices of illness and death. Newspapers arrived, bringing the world to Exeter's doorsteps. People likely gathered around to hear about life in faraway places.

And for others, no letters arrived at all. Robert would have witnessed it all – the joy, the celebration, the disappointment and the sorrow.

Robert's role as postmaster would have brought him into regular contact with many of Exeter's residents. The position gave Robert an excellent pulse on his community.

Post offices often became local landmarks, according to the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society. Postmasters became trusted figures who helped connect isolated frontier communities to the outside world.[lxv]

Robert oversaw the post office through some of America's most turbulent times—the Civil War. Even places as rural as Exeter were affected by the war's impacts. News good and bad undoubtedly passed through the post office and Robert's hands.

Such news included word on two of his sons, James and Eugene, who both enlisted in Wisconsin infantry units.

In fact, Robert's son Eugene was shot in the shoulder at Antietam and taken prisoner, but later released, according to the Wisconsin 3rd Infantry history. Eugene was hospitalized for six months before returning home.[lxvi]

We can't be certain Robert heard of his son's peril by mail, but if letters were sent to the family, they would have passed through Robert's post office.

The war had such a serious effect on the nation that Secretary of War E.M. Stanton issued a rare order authorizing postmasters to arrest soldiers found absent from their commands without just cause. The authority was published in the Monroe Sentinel on August 6, 1862.

"U.S. Marshals in the respective districts, the major and chief of police of any town or city, the sheriff of the respective counties of each state, and all postmasters and justices of the peace are authorized to act as special provost

marshal to arrest any officer or private soldier fit for duty who may be found absent from his command without just cause, and convey him to the nearest military post or post," the order read.[lxvii]

There's no evidence to prove that Robert made any such arrests, but he had the authority to do so.

Robert's focus on the community wasn't just in government. For Monroe's July 4, 1860 Independence Day celebration, Robert was chosen as one of the vice presidents for the event, which was announced in the *Monroe Sentinel* newspaper.

The event drew people from around the surrounding counties and featured a procession through the courthouse square, patriotic speeches, music, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, and an evening fireworks display.[lxviii]

Traveling anywhere in Green County was slow and investing in a day of travel meant a day away from the farm and a day of not working. People tended not to travel far for that reason, unless they needed to. The trip from Exeter to Monroe was roughly 18 miles, for example.

One final document demonstrates the confidence others placed in him. This time it related to family.

On May 30, 1853, Robert helped out his brother, Chester Witter, by serving as his attorney-in-fact in a land transaction in Attica, which sat a few miles from Exeter. Robert appeared in person for Chester to execute the transaction on his behalf. Robert signed the document before a notary public.

The $750 transaction transferred ownership from Chester and his wife, Emily Witter, to Chester McKinney, also of Green County.

This particular property was somewhat unusual and not just farmland. The deed describes a mill in which Chester owned one-half interest in a sawmill and a flouring mill. Certain aspects of the property are excluded—a distillery with its associated buildings and water privileges had previously been sold to another person.[lxix]

The properties were located at SW 1/4 of the SW 1/4 and the SE 1/4 of the SW 1/4 of Section 31, T4N R9E near Attica, Wisconsin.

The records don't explain Chester's decision to appoint Robert as his attorney-in-fact. It's possible Chester wasn't present at the time. Whatever the reason, Robert was legally authorized to execute the conveyance in Chester's name, a responsibility recognized by the buyer, the witnesses, and the notary who acknowledged the deed.

Robert served Exeter in one additional community role. He was among the founding members of the Exeter Cemetery Association. That cemetery still exists today and is located at the corner of County Road D and Doyle Road. Robert and Lorana are not buried there, but Robert was instrumental in the cemetery's creation.

The organizational meeting was held on November 7, 1853. Fifteen people attended, including Robert. Their names are listed in the county records. Robert was elected as one of the association's seven original trustees during the association's first year.[lxx]

Few records survive that explain how the cemetery was established, how the cemetery property was obtained, how it was laid out, and what the rules were for operating and maintaining the property. Robert likely would have been involved in those decisions, but no details exist in surviving records.

Today, more than 180 memorials are listed for Exeter Cemetery on Find a Grave, providing a lasting reminder of Robert's contributions to the people of Exeter.[lxxi]

Illustration created with ChatGPT by OpenAI, 2026.

As Robert and Lorana's children grew, married, and left home, Robert and Lorana remained on their Exeter farm until Lorana's declining health made it necessary for them to leave, the obituary stated.

"The increasing feebleness of Mrs. Witter rendered it at length necessary to give up the care of the farm and they came to Brodhead to reside with their daughter, Mrs. M. H. Williams," stated Robert's obituary, published in the *Brodhead Independent* on October 28, 1887.

"Their short, unobtrusive life here, all know," the obituary continued. "Of a genial disposition, apparently always happy, with devoted tenderness, he gave himself to the care of his wife until a little more than two years ago she passed from suffering into rest, leaving him, as he said: 'nothing to do.'"[lxxii]

Lorana died on July 2, 1885. Her death greatly affected Robert.

"Broken down with watching and care, few thought he would survive as long as he did, but after a little he seemed to gain in strength and was better than he had been for years before," the obituary stated.[lxxiii]

In 1887, Robert's son Eugene came to visit. The obituary said he greatly enjoyed seeing his son. Lorana's sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Calkins of Aurora, Ill., visited as well.

But within days of their departure, Robert fell ill and became bedridden.[lxxiv]

"Suffering greatly, he still desired not to take the medicine which would ease his pain, thinking it would prolong his life and he was anxious to depart," the obituary stated. "When questioned by a friend he replied, 'All is bright beyond,' showing that although the days here were long and dreary, he was looking for a better country."

His daughters M. H. Williams, of Brodhead, and Mrs. Allen of Oberlin, Kansas, arrived to be present.[lxxv]

"Very gradually, the strong man wore away beneath the heavy hand of age, and on Thursday afternoon (October 20, 1887), about 5:30 o'clock, after an illness of ten weeks, he passed away," the obituary stated. Funeral services were held the next day at the Williams home.[lxxvi]

For more than four decades, Robert lived in Green County. During those years he farmed, invested in land, served in public office, operated the Exeter post office, and helped build the community he chose to call home. When he died, he became part of the landscape that had defined the second half of his life. Robert was buried beside his wife, Lorana, in Greenwood Cemetery in Brodhead.[lxxvii] Together in life and together in death.

Appendices

Appendix A
Master Timeline of Robert Witter (1802–1887)

Editorial Note. *This timeline highlights major documented events in Robert Witter's life. It is intended as a chronological reference rather than an exhaustive list of every land transaction or legal record. Dates are exact where the surviving records permit.*

Early Life and New York

- **20 Jul 1802 —** Born in Scipio, Cayuga County, New York, son of Ebenezer Witter Jr. and Zerviah Spaulding.
- **15 Jan 1822 —** Married Lorana Rood.
- **2 Aug 1823 —** Purchased property in Auburn, Cayuga County, for $325, his earliest documented land purchase identified in the narrative.
- **1824 —** Son James Spaulding Witter born.
- **1 Nov 1825 —** Acquired approximately 110 acres in Scipio, Cayuga County.
- **1826 —** Daughter Louisa Jane Witter born.
- **1828 —** Son Andrew J. Witter born.
- **15 Apr 1829 —** Purchased 75 acres near Scipio for $2,925 and, with Lorana, executed a mortgage with William Close the same day.
- **1830 —** Daughter Emeline E. Witter born.
- **1833 —** Son Chester Rood Witter born.
- **1 Apr 1835 —** A Genesee County deed placed Robert in Covington and documented a land transaction with his brother Chester.
- **1 Apr 1836 —** Advanced $1,236.45 to Elias Bond and received a mortgage securing the debt.
- **1841 —** Son Eugene Robert Witter born.
- **21 Apr 1842 —** Robert and Lorana sold a 60-acre tract in Middlebury, Wyoming County, to William Bainbridge for $1,500; this is the last known New York land transaction identified in the narrative.

Migration and Early Wisconsin Years

- **By Aug 1843 —** Robert and Lorana were in Wisconsin Territory. An August 22 mortgage identifies them as residents of Green County and concerns 240 acres in Grant County.
- **1843 —** Elected Green County commissioner, receiving 148 votes.
- **Aug 1844 —** Served on the jury assembled to investigate the murder of Author Smith in Green County.
- **1 May 1845 —** Federal patent issued for 80 acres previously purchased through the Mineral Point Land Office: W½ SE¼, Section 7, Township 3 North, Range 8 East.
- **1845 —** Built a sawmill on the Little Sugar River for his brother Chester Witter, according to the History of Green County.

Public Service and Community Roles

- **3 Apr 1849 —** At Exeter's first town election, chosen for the three-member Board of Supervisors, selected as one of two treasurers, and elected justice of the peace.
- **28 Jul 1849 —** Appointed with two other men to appraise the estate of George W. Smith; Robert took the required oath and participated in the appraisal on September 1.
- **14 Jul 1851 —** Appointed with T. J. Safford and John Porter to appraise the estate of Thomas L. Summers.

- **1849–1856 —** Served as justice of the peace. Elected at Exeter's first town election on April 3, 1849; surviving deed records from 1850–1856 document Robert acting in his official capacity. The complete extent of his judicial service remains unknown.
- **30 May 1853 —** Acted as attorney-in-fact for his brother Chester Witter in a Green County land transaction involving mill property near Attica.
- **7 Nov 1853 —** Participated in the organizational meeting of the Exeter Cemetery Association and was elected one of its seven original trustees.
- **6 Oct 1856 —** Appointed postmaster of Exeter, Wisconsin.
- **4 Jul 1860 —** Served as one of the vice presidents for Monroe's Independence Day celebration.
- **3 Oct 1867 —** John Porter was appointed postmaster of Exeter, ending Robert's nearly eleven-year documented tenure as postmaster.
- **7 Nov 1870 —** Appointed by the Green County Court to act as guardian in the estate matter involving the minor heirs of William Fletcher; he conducted the court-authorized sale of their Exeter lots.

Later Life

- **Mar 1882 —** Robert and Lorana left the Exeter farm and moved to Brodhead to live with their daughter Mrs. M. H. Williams because of Lorana's increasing feebleness, according to Robert's obituary.
- **2 Jul 1885 —** Lorana Rood Witter died.
- **Early 1887 —** Robert received visits from his son Eugene and from Lorana's sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Calkins of Aurora, Illinois.
- **20 Oct 1887 —** Robert Witter died in Brodhead after an illness of about ten weeks.
- **1887 —** Buried beside Lorana in Greenwood Cemetery in Brodhead, Green County, Wisconsin.

Source Basis

Compiled from the sources cited in the audited Robert Witter narrative, including New York and Wisconsin land and mortgage records; federal land records; Green County probate and deed records; federal postmaster appointment records; contemporary newspapers; local histories; census records; Robert Witter's obituary; and cemetery records.

Appendix B

Land and Green County Statistical Analysis of Robert Witter (1802–1887)

Editorial Note. *This appendix summarizes quantitative findings established during the land-record and narrative audits. The figures are based on documented records currently identified and should not be read as a complete accounting of every property Robert may have owned. Acreage totals are necessarily approximate because some transactions involved town lots or parcels for which acreage was not stated.*

Lifetime Land Activity

Measure	Documented Finding
Documented properties	36
States represented	2 — New York and Wisconsin
Counties represented	5 — Cayuga, Genesee, Wyoming, Grant, and Green
Estimated documented acreage	Approximately 3,500–4,500 acres
Earliest documented land purchase identified in the narrative	2 August 1823 — Auburn, Cayuga County, New York
Last known New York land transaction identified in the narrative	21 April 1842 — Middlebury, Wyoming County, New York

Wisconsin and Green County

- Robert and Lorana were documented in Wisconsin Territory by August 1843.
- The August 22, 1843 Grant County mortgage concerned 240 acres and identified Robert and Lorana as residents of Green County.
- A federal patent was issued to Robert on May 1, 1845, for an 80-acre tract purchased earlier through the Mineral Point Land Office: W½ SE¼, Section 7, Township 3 North, Range 8 East.
- The Green County compilation identifies 24 deeds involving Robert over roughly four decades, representing more than 1,000 acres in addition to town lots and parcels for which acreage was not specified.
- Green County properties included rural acreage and lots/property associated with Monroe, Albany, and Exeter.

Documented Public and Fiduciary Activity in Green County

Role	Documented Evidence
County commissioner	1843; elected with 148 votes; one-year term
Exeter town offices	1849; Board of Supervisors, one of two treasurers, and justice of the peace
Justice of the peace evidence	Twelve verified deed-record entries identified in the author's compilation; the complete extent of Robert's judicial activity remains unknown
Probate appraiser	George W. Smith estate, 1849; Thomas L. Summers estate, 1851
Attorney-in-fact	Acted for brother Chester Witter in a land conveyance, 1853
Exeter Cemetery Association	Founding participant and one of seven original trustees, 1853
Postmaster of Exeter	6 October 1856–3 October 1867
Guardian	Appointed in the Fletcher minor-heirs matter, 1870

How to Read These Numbers

The totals describe the surviving documentary record, not necessarily the full extent of Robert's activity. The 36-property lifetime count and the estimated 3,500–4,500 acres are documented totals compiled from identified land

records. Likewise, the 24 Green County deeds and the 12 justice-of-the-peace references reflect records located and counted during this project. Additional records could alter these totals.

Source Basis

Compiled from the land records and supporting sources cited in the audited narrative, including Cayuga, Genesee, and Wyoming County, New York, deeds and mortgages; Grant and Green County, Wisconsin, land records; United States General Land Office records; Green County probate records; federal postmaster appointment records; and the author's compiled deed analyses.

Appendix C

Selected Land and Mortgage Transactions of Robert Witter (1802–1887)

Editorial Note. *Robert Witter's surviving land record is too extensive to reproduce deed by deed in this appendix. This selected chronology highlights transactions that are specifically discussed in the audited narrative or that help establish his movement from New York to Wisconsin and the character of his land activity. Appendix B provides the compiled lifetime totals. Transactions involving Robert only as a justice of the peace, witness, appraiser, guardian, or attorney-in-fact are treated elsewhere.*

New York

Date	County / Record	Robert's Role	Significance
2 Aug 1823	Cayuga County Deeds, vol. U, pp. 465–466	Buyer	Alvah Warden to Robert Witter; Auburn property purchased for $325. Earliest documented land purchase identified in the audited narrative.
1 Nov 1825	Cayuga County Deeds, vol. FF, pp. 328–329	Buyer	Lucretia Stevens, Horatio L. Stevens, and Samuel Stevens to Robert Witter; approximately 110 acres in Scipio.
15 Apr 1829	Cayuga County Deeds, vol. LL, p. 394; Mortgages, vol. R, p. 531	Buyer / Mortgagor	Purchased 75 acres from Asahel and Martha Fitch for $2,925 and executed a mortgage with William Close the same day.
1 Apr 1835	Genesee County Deeds, vol. 36, pp. 229–230	Buyer	Chester and Emily Witter to Robert Witter; deed places Robert in Covington and documents continued western New York land activity.
1 Apr 1836	Genesee County Mortgages, vol. 17, pp. 336–337	Mortgagee / Lender	Robert advanced Elias Bond $1,236.45 and received a mortgage securing the debt.
21 Apr 1842	Wyoming County Deeds, vol. 4, p. 241	Seller	Robert and Lorana Witter to William Bainbridge; 60 acres in Middlebury for $1,500. Last known New York land transaction identified in the audited narrative.

Wisconsin

Date	County / Record	Robert's Role	Significance
22 Aug 1843	Grant County Mortgages, vol. 2, pp. 128–129	Mortgagor	Robert and Lorana mortgaged 240 acres in Grant County to William Brown. The instrument identifies them as residents of Green County, Wisconsin Territory; satisfaction entered 17 Nov 1845.
27 Feb 1845	Green County Deeds, vol. 2, p. 109	Seller	Robert and Lorana conveyed the W½ SE¼ of Section 7, T3N R8E—80 acres—to A. F. Stedman for $800. The legal description matches the federal patent tract.
1 May 1845	United States General Land Office, Certificate No. 6481	Patentee	Federal patent issued for the W½ SE¼ of Section 7, T3N R8E, 80 acres, following an earlier purchase through the Mineral Point Land Office.
23 Jun 1845	Green County Deeds, vol. 2, p. 39	Buyer	Thomas and Ann Maria Walsh to Robert Witter; 120 acres in Section 2, T3N R8E, for $300.
1840s–1880s	Green County Deeds, various volumes	Buyer / Seller / Mortgagor	Robert continued acquiring, selling, and mortgaging rural acreage and town property in Green County. The author's compilation identifies 24 deeds involving more than 1,000 acres, in addition to town lots and parcels with unspecified acreage.

Documentary Scope

Across Cayuga, Genesee, and Wyoming Counties in New York and Grant and Green Counties in Wisconsin, the author's compilation identifies 36 documented properties totaling an estimated 3,500–4,500 acres. These figures are approximate because some records concern town lots or parcels for which acreage was not specified. The selected transactions above are therefore examples of a much larger record rather than a complete deed register.

Source Basis

Compiled from the deed, mortgage, and federal land records cited in the audited narrative and from the author's land-record compilations. Original county records and federal land records control where earlier working summaries conflict with the final narrative.

Appendix D

Civic Offices, Legal Roles, and Community Service of Robert Witter (1802–1887)

Editorial Note. *This appendix summarizes Robert Witter's documented public offices, legal and fiduciary roles, and selected community service in Green County, Wisconsin. It distinguishes offices Robert is known to have held from duties the law merely authorized an officeholder to perform.*

Documented Offices and Community Roles

Date	Role	Documented Activity
1843	Green County commissioner	Elected with 148 votes. Territorial law provided a one-year term.
Aug 1844	Inquest juror	Empaneled with others to investigate the death of Author Smith; J. R. Cocker's account identifies Robert as a member of the inquest jury.
3 Apr 1849	Exeter Board of Supervisors	Chosen at Exeter's first town election as a member of the three-person board.
3 Apr 1849	Exeter treasurer	Selected as one of two treasurers at Exeter's first town election.
1849; documented deed activity 1850–1856	Justice of the peace	Elected at Exeter's first town election. Surviving deed records repeatedly show Robert acknowledging conveyances in his official capacity; the author's compilation identifies twelve verified land-record entries. His court docket has not been located.
1849	Probate appraiser — George W. Smith estate	Appointed with two other men to inventory and appraise estate property; oath and appraisal completed September 1, 1849.
14 Jul 1851	Probate appraiser — Thomas L. Summers estate	Appointed with T. J. Safford and John Porter; the men took the required oath and prepared the estate inventory and valuation.
30 May 1853	Attorney-in-fact for Chester Witter	Acted for his brother Chester in a $750 land conveyance involving mill property near Attica.
7 Nov 1853	Exeter Cemetery Association trustee	Participated in the organizational meeting and was elected one of seven original trustees for the association's first year.
6 Oct 1856–3 Oct 1867	Postmaster of Exeter	Appointed October 6, 1856; John Porter was appointed his successor October 3, 1867.
4 Jul 1860	Monroe Independence Day vice president	Chosen as one of the vice presidents for Monroe's Independence Day celebration.

1870	Guardian — Fletcher minor heirs	Appointed by the Green County Court in the estate matter Emma J., Ellen M., and Sarah E. Fletcher; carried out the court-supervised sale of their Exeter lots.

Justice of the Peace: Scope of the Office

Wisconsin law authorized justices of the peace to preside over courts of limited jurisdiction in civil and criminal matters, issue legal process, receive evidence, summon and swear witnesses, supervise juries, enter judgments, and maintain official dockets and case papers. These statutory powers describe the office, not necessarily Robert's personal caseload. The twelve verified Green County deed-book entries chiefly document him acknowledging deeds and certifying the appearance and voluntary execution of conveyances.

Because Robert's justice docket and accompanying case papers have not been located, the full range of matters he actually heard cannot be reconstructed. Appendix F lists the known deed-record references identified during this project.

Probate and Fiduciary Responsibilities

Robert's probate work placed him in roles requiring formal oaths, valuation of property, compliance with court orders, and accountability to the Green County Court. The George W. Smith and Thomas L. Summers estate files document his work as an appraiser. The 1870 Fletcher minor-heirs file documents a more extensive court-supervised responsibility: Robert furnished a bond, arranged required notice, conducted a public auction, reported the sale to the court, obtained judicial confirmation, and completed the conveyance.

Source Basis

Compiled from the sources cited in the audited narrative, including History of Green County, Wisconsin (1884); Green County deed and probate records; Wisconsin territorial and state statutes; federal postmaster appointment records; the Monroe Sentinel; and the Exeter Cemetery Association organizational record.

Appendix E

Maps, Plats, and Property Locations of Robert Witter (1802–1887)

Editorial Note. *This appendix provides a geographic reference to selected places and properties important in Robert Witter's life. It summarizes locations established by legal descriptions, plats, federal land records, and other documentary evidence. The accompanying visual material is presented in Appendix G. Where the surviving evidence does not establish a precise location, this appendix does not attempt to reconstruct one.*

New York

Location	Date	Geographic Significance
Auburn, Cayuga County	2 Aug 1823	Earliest documented land purchase identified in the audited narrative; property purchased from Alvah Warden for $325.
Scipio, Cayuga County	1 Nov 1825	Approximately 110 acres acquired from Lucretia, Horatio L., and Samuel Stevens.
Scipio, Cayuga County	15 Apr 1829	75-acre purchase from Asahel and Martha Fitch; Robert executed a mortgage with William Close the same day.
Covington / western New York	1 Apr 1835	Genesee County deed involving Robert and his brother Chester; part of Robert's later western New York land activity.
Middlebury, Wyoming County	21 Apr 1842	Robert and Lorana sold 60 acres to William Bainbridge; last known New York land transaction identified in the audited narrative.

Wisconsin

Location	Date / Period	Geographic Significance
Grant County	22 Aug 1843	Mortgage concerning 240 acres. The record identifies Robert and Lorana as residents of Green County, Wisconsin Territory.
Section 7, T3N R8E, Green County	1 May 1845	Federal patent issued for the W½ SE¼, 80 acres, following an earlier purchase through the Mineral Point Land Office. Modern Monticello occupies a significant portion of this tract.
Little Sugar River corridor	1845 context	The West Branch of the Little Sugar River crosses the northern portion of the Section 7 tract. The historical source associates Robert and Chester's sawmill with the Little Sugar River, but the surviving evidence does not establish the mill's precise location.

Section 2, T3N R8E, Green County	23 Jun 1845	120-acre purchase from Thomas and Ann Maria Walsh.
Monroe	1840s–1860s	Robert acquired town property in Monroe. Historic plat material helps place some early Monroe-area land descriptions in their urban context.
Exeter	1840s–1880s	Robert held rural acreage and town lots in and around Exeter. The planned village plat did not develop into a substantial town.
Section 35, T4N R8E, Exeter Township	15 Nov 1862	Federal postal site-location report places the Exeter post office in the northeast quarter of Section 35. The surviving report does not establish whether the office was in Robert's home, a store, or another building.
Greenwood Cemetery, Brodhead	1885–1887	Burial place of Lorana and Robert Witter.

Mapping Principles Used in This Book

- Legal descriptions and original plats control the identification of historic parcels whenever available.
- Modern satellite or road imagery is used only to help readers understand where a historic tract lies in today's landscape.
- Modern boundaries, roads, buildings, and place names should not be assumed to have existed during Robert's lifetime.
- No precise sawmill location is shown because the surviving evidence does not identify one.
- Appendix G contains the selected maps, plats, property reconstructions, and cemetery images used as visual references.

Source Basis

Compiled from the land, mortgage, plat, federal land, postal site-location, and cemetery sources cited in the audited narrative and from the mapped property research prepared for this project. Appendix G provides the corresponding visual material.

Appendix F

Known Green County Deed-Record References to Robert Witter as Justice of the Peace

Editorial Note. *This appendix preserves the 12 entries verified during the Green County deed audit in which Robert Witter acted in his official capacity as justice of the peace. The register documents surviving deed-book evidence; it is not a complete record of Robert's judicial work. His justice docket and accompanying case papers have not been located. Document IDs are research identifiers used in this project.*

Document ID	Green County Deed Book	Deed Book Date Range	Record Type	Verified JP Reference
GCWD-006	Vol. 4, p. 176	1847–1850	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-008	Vol. 5, pp. 109–110	1847–1850	Quitclaim deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-009	Vol. 5, p. 254	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-015	Vol. 6, p. 19	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-016	Vol. 6, p. 20	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-017	Vol. 6, p. 21	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-018	Vol. 6, pp. 76–77	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-020	Vol. 6, pp. 289–290	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-021	Vol. 6, p. 310	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-022	Vol. 6, p. 366	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-025	Vol. 7, p. 34	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.
GCWD-026	Vol. 7, p. 127	1850–1853	Warranty deed	Robert Witter identified as justice of the peace.

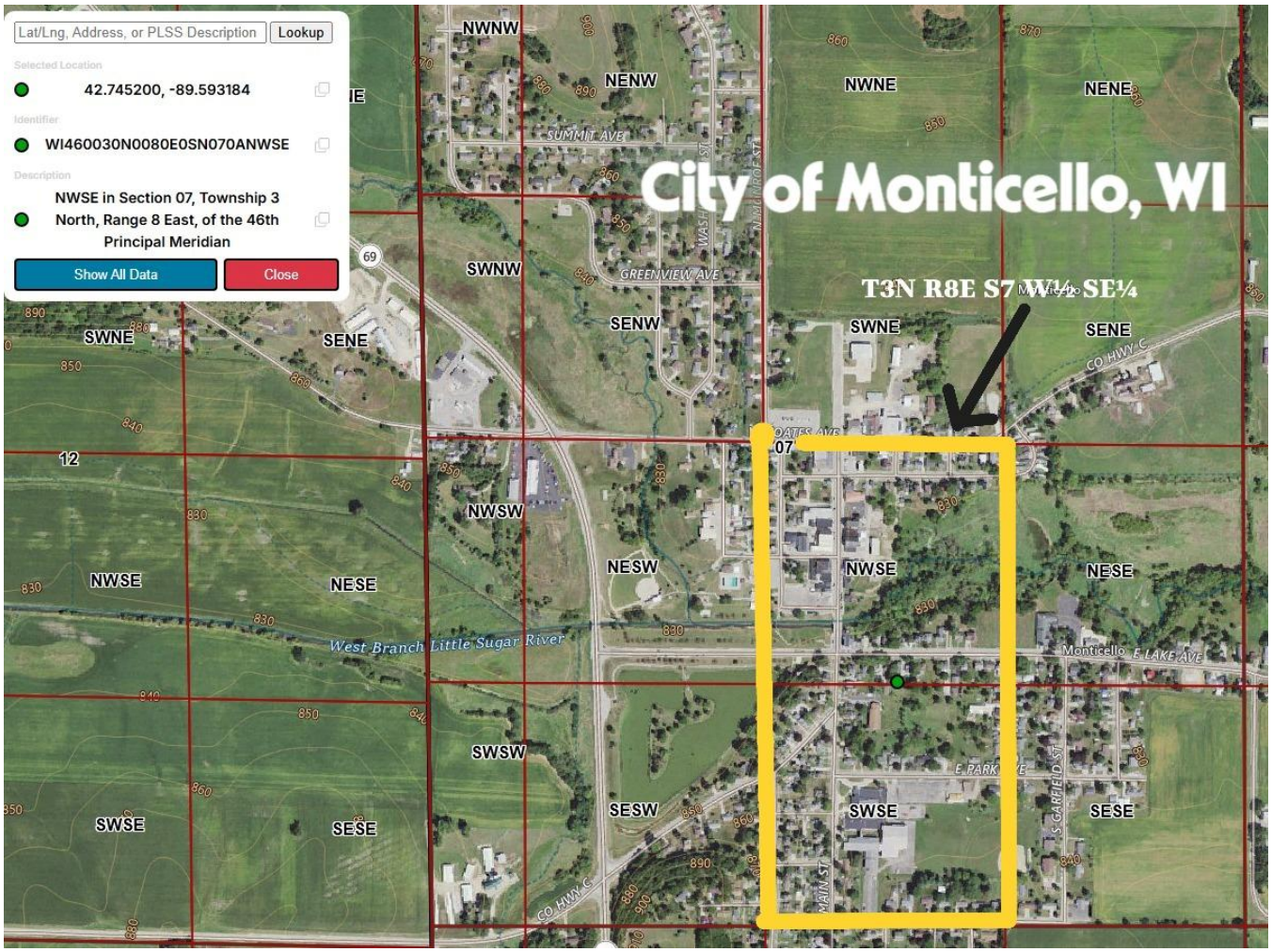
Total documented references in this deed-audit register: 12.

Source Basis. Green County, Wisconsin, Deeds, various volumes, digital images, FamilySearch.org. The volume/page references and project document IDs above are retained from the Green County deed audit. The deed-book date ranges shown above describe the date ranges covered by the respective deed volumes and should not be interpreted as the execution dates of individual instruments or as Robert's exact term date.

Appendix G
Illustrated Atlas of Robert Witter Properties and Communities

Editor's Note: *This appendix is intended to serve as the visual companion to Appendix E. It identifies the maps, plats, photographs, cemetery records, and modern mapping materials associated with Robert Witter and his properties.*

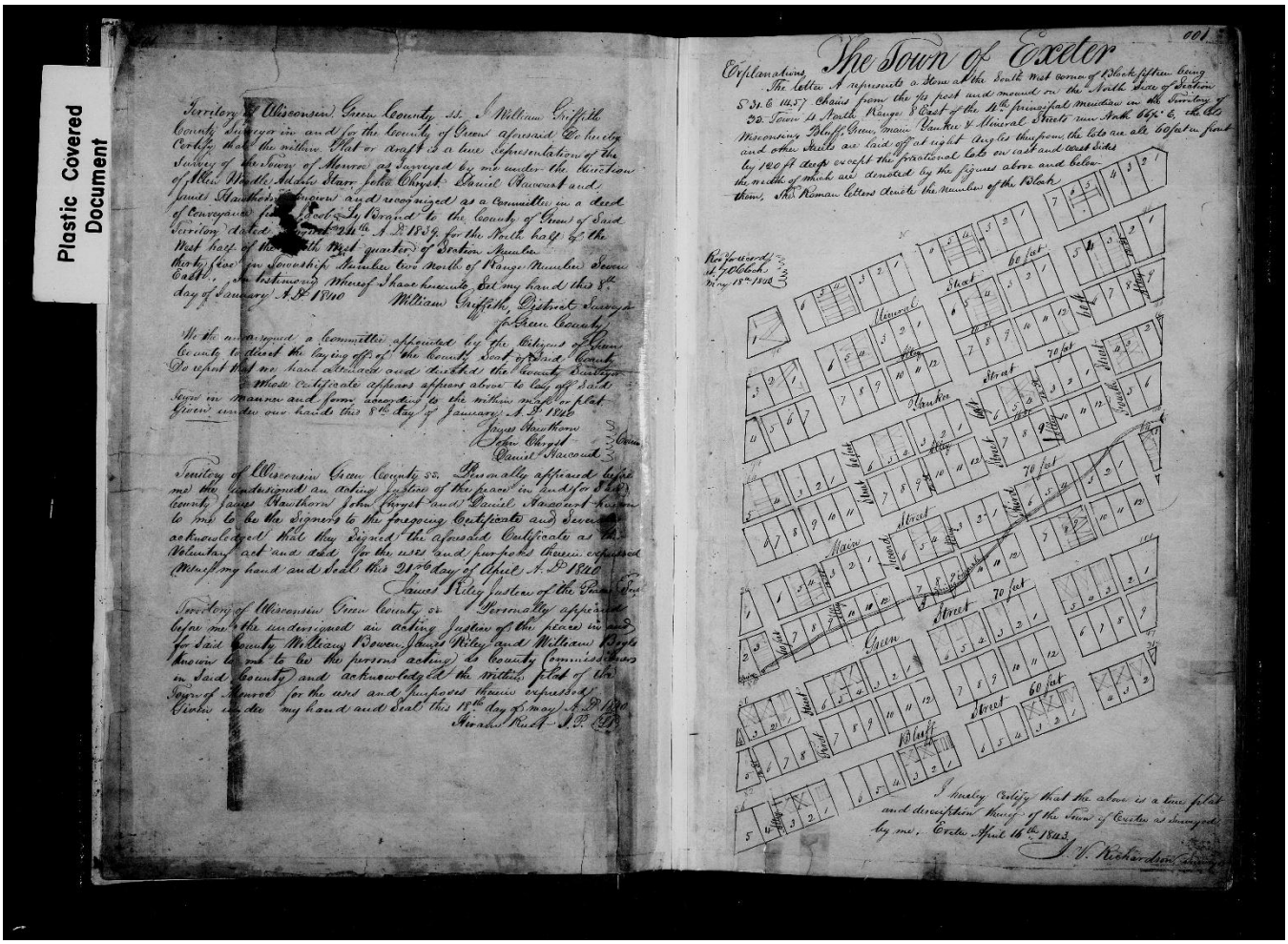
Figure G-1: Federal Land Patent Property



Robert Witter's 80-acre federal land patent, comprising the west half of the southeast quarter of Section 7, Township 3 North, Range 8 East. Modern Monticello developed across much of the original tract.

Source: PLSSMap. *Public Land Survey System* Mapping Application. Accessed August 2026.

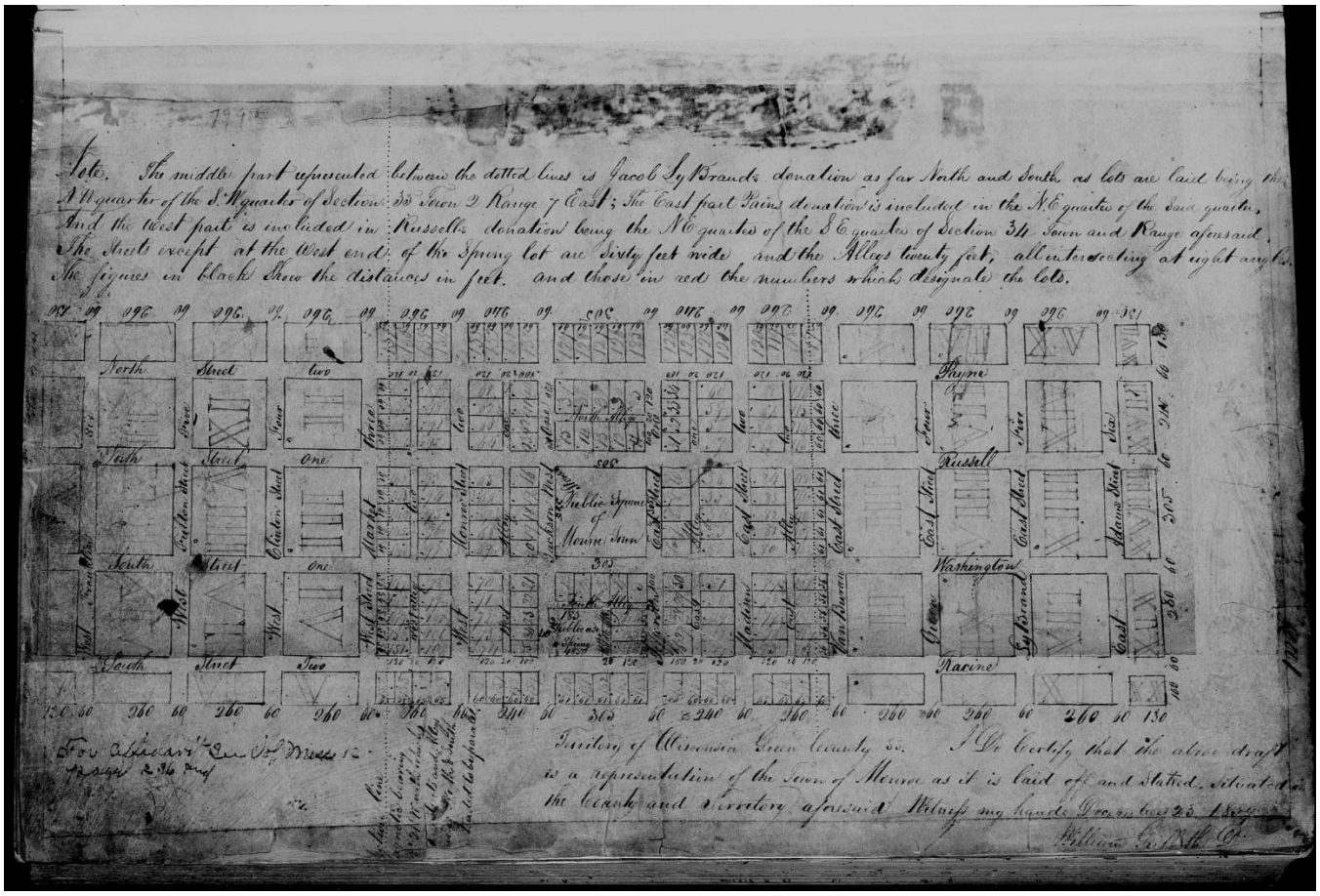
Figure G-2: Town of Exeter Plat (1843)


Plastic Covered Document
The Town of Exeter
Explanations
Green
Main
Street
Bluff
Green
I hereby Certify that the above is a true plat and description thereof of the Town of Exeter as Surveyed by me, Exeter April 18th 1843
J. V. Richardson

Note: This is the original plat for the planned town of Exeter. Robert later acquired lots within the platted community, but Exeter never developed into a substantial town.

Source: MAP, Deeds, Green County, Wisconsin, Volume A, 1839–1845, Pages 2-3.

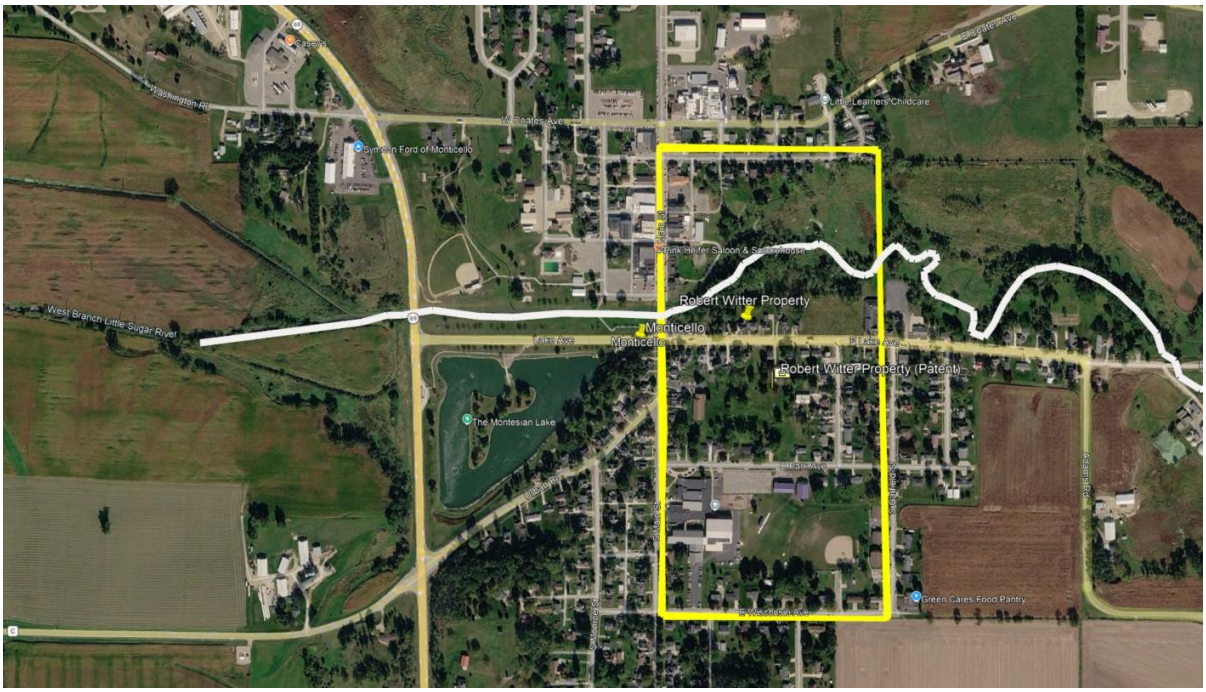
Figure G-3: Plat of the Town of Monroe (1843)


Notes. The middle part represented between the dotted lines is Jacob Sy Brands donation as far North and South as lots are laid being the N W quarter of the S W quarter of Section 30 Town 2 Range 7 East; The East part Pains donation is included in the N E quarter of the said quarter. And the West part is included in Russells donation being the N E quarter of the S E quarter of Section 31 Town and Range aforesaid. The Streets except at the West end of the Spring lot are Sixty feet wide and the Alleys twenty feet, all intersecting at right angles. The figures in blacks show the distances in feet. and those in red the numbers which designate the lots.
North Street
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
South Street
One
Public Square of Monroe Town
Russell
Washington
Marine
Territory of Wisconsin Green County ss. I Do Certify that the above draft is a representation of the Town of Monroe as it is laid off and Platted, situated in the County and Territory aforesaid Witness my hands Dec 25 1843
William Canfield Co

Note: Robert acquired town property in Monroe during his years in Green County. The historic plat provides geographic context for those holdings and for Monroe's development as the county's principal community.

Source: MAP, Deeds, Green County, Wisconsin, Volume A, 1839–1845, Page 1

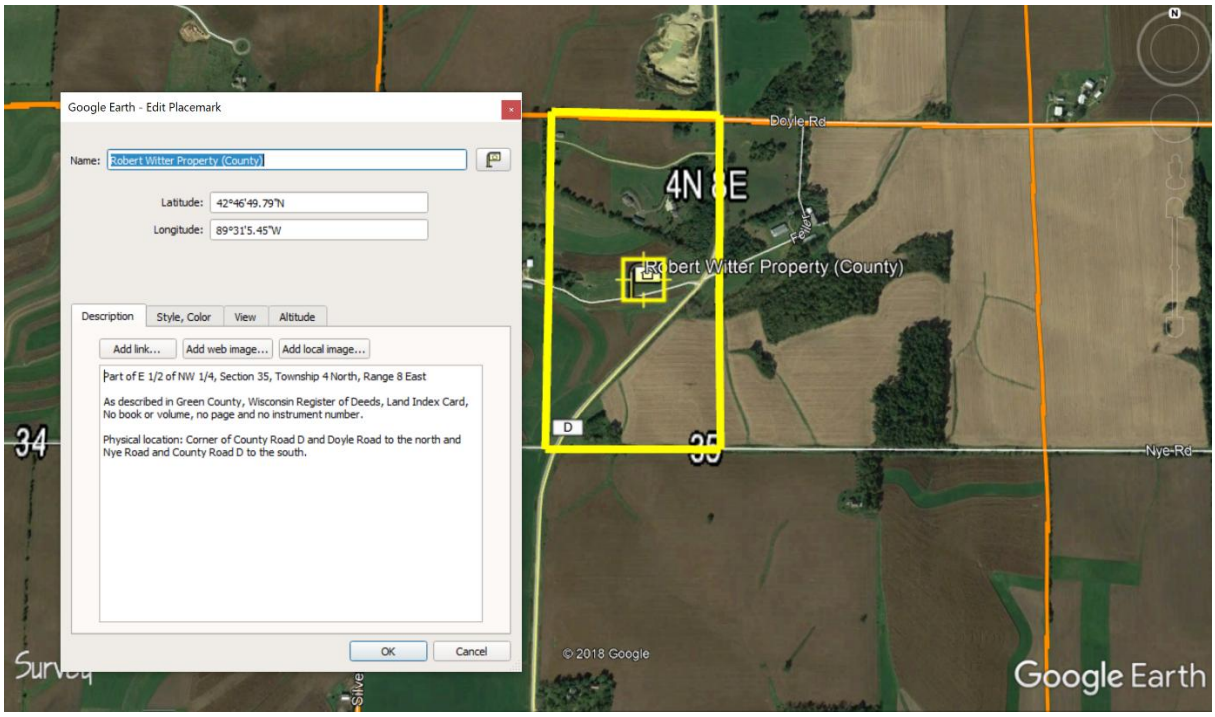
Figure G-4: Little Sugar River Corridor



The West Branch of the Little Sugar River crosses the northern portion of Robert Witter's 80-acre Section 7 tract. A historical account associates the Witter sawmill with the Little Sugar River, but surviving evidence does not establish the mill's precise location. This modern map is included only to show the river's relationship to Robert's documented property.

Source: Google. *Google Earth Pro.* Geographic imagery and mapping software. Accessed August 2026.

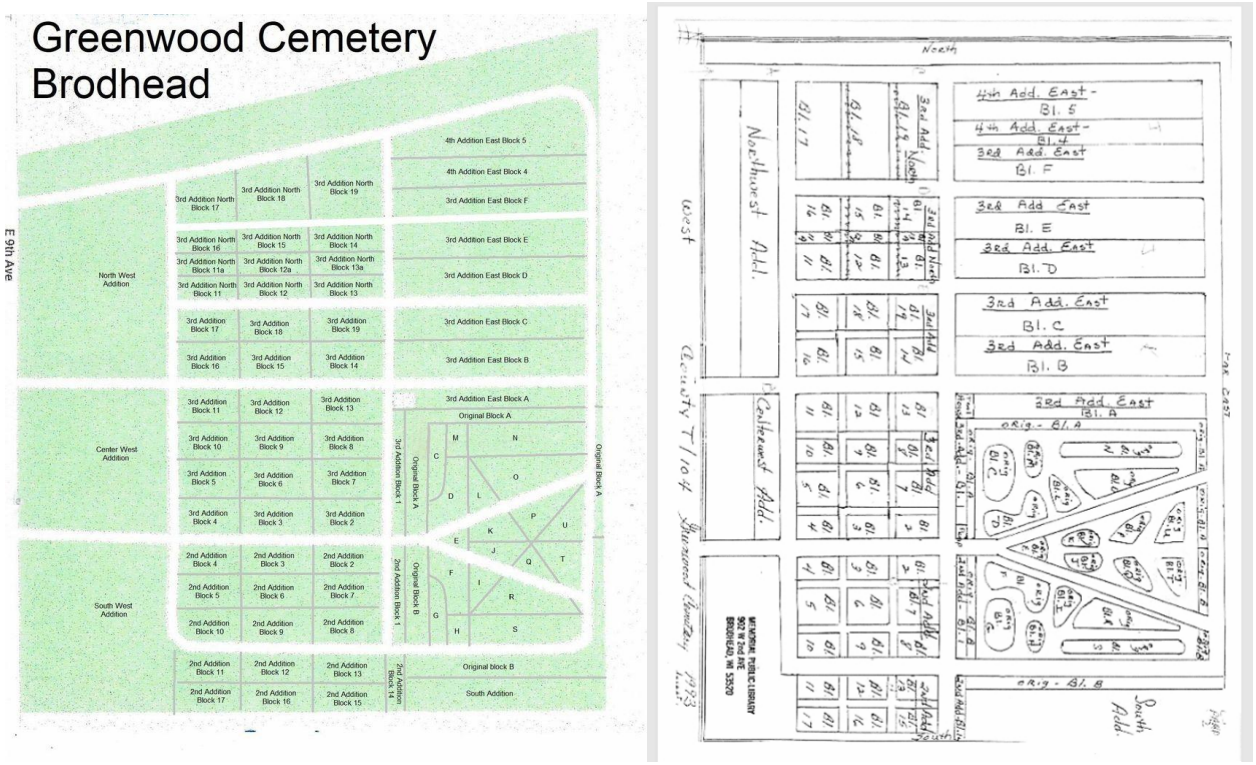
Figure G-5: Section 34 Exeter Property


Google Earth - Edit Placemark
Name: Robert Witter Property (County)
Latitude: 42°46'49.79"N
Longitude: 89°31'5.45"W
Description
Style, Color
View
Altitude
Add link...
Add web image...
Add local image...
Part of E 1/2 of NW 1/4, Section 35, Township 4 North, Range 8 East
As described in Green County, Wisconsin Register of Deeds, Land Index Card, No book or volume, no page and no instrument number.
Physical location: Corner of County Road D and Doyle Road to the north and Nye Road and County Road D to the south.
OK
Cancel
Doyle Rd
4N 8E
Robert Witter Property (County)
D
34
35
Nye Rd
© 2018 Google
Google Earth

Section 34, Township 4 North, Range 8 East, was one of the principal areas of Robert Witter's landholding activity around Exeter. Surviving deeds document multiple acquisitions and sales within the section over a period of years, including several forty-acre tracts. The map provides geographic context for this concentration of Robert's Exeter properties.

Sources: Green County, Wisconsin, Deeds, various volumes; property location reconstructed from the legal descriptions recorded in Robert Witter's Green County deeds. Google. *Google Earth Pro*. Geographic imagery and mapping software. Accessed August 2026.

Figure G-6: Greenwood Cemetery Plot Map



Note: Greenwood Cemetery in Brodhead became the final resting place of Robert and Lorana Witter. This plot material provides geographic context for their burial location within the cemetery.

Sources:

Left: Lyle Amundson, https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/88051/greenwood-cemetery.
Right: Menominee Public Library.

Figure G-7: Gravestone of Robert Witter, Greenwood Cemetery, Brodhead, WI

Source: Paul Patton, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/169804245/robert-witter.
Note: Robert is buried in Greenwood Cemetery. His plot is Orig Blk T; Row 2, next to Lorana.

Figure G-8: Gravestone of Lorana Rood Witter

Source: Paul Patton, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/169804256/lorana-witter#view-photo=149849876.
Note: Lorana is buried in Greenwood Cemetery. Her plot is Orig Blk T; Row 2, next to Robert.

Appendix H

Robert Witter as Federal Postmaster of Exeter, Wisconsin (1856–1867)

Editorial Note. *This appendix documents Robert Witter's service as postmaster of Exeter, Green County, Wisconsin, from 1856 to 1867. It brings together surviving federal appointment records, official registers of United States officers and employees, postal site and route records, a contemporary newspaper mail schedule, and federal postal regulations to provide a documentary overview of his tenure and the operation of the Exeter post office.*

1. Appointment and Length of Service

Robert Witter was appointed postmaster of Exeter on October 6, 1856. Federal appointment records show that he succeeded Henry W. Lee, who had been appointed on November 25, 1852. Robert remained postmaster until John Porter was appointed his successor on October 3, 1867. The surviving appointment record therefore documents nearly eleven years of service.

2. Service Record

Date	Documented Event
25 Nov 1852	Henry W. Lee appointed postmaster of Exeter.
6 Oct 1856	Robert Witter appointed postmaster of Exeter.
15 Nov 1862	Federal site-location report identifies the Exeter post office in the northeast quarter of Section 35, Township 4 North, Range 8 East.
30 Sept 1863	Robert Witter listed as Exeter postmaster in the federal Register of Officers and Agents.
30 Sept 1865	Robert Witter again listed as Exeter postmaster in the federal Register of Officers and Agents.
3 Oct 1867	John Porter appointed postmaster of Exeter, succeeding Robert Witter.

3. Duties of the Office

Federal postal regulations in force during Robert's tenure describe a working office with substantial administrative responsibilities. As postmaster, Robert was responsible for receiving, sorting, and dispatching mail; delivering letters to local residents; collecting postage; maintaining the accounts and records required by the Post Office Department; and reporting irregularities or failures in the mail service. Postmasters were also required to execute a bond and take an oath of office before assuming their duties.

Nineteenth-century postmasters at small offices commonly supplied the office space and equipment, maintained regular business hours, and could receive compensation based on the business conducted by the office. Federal registers for 1863 and 1865 specifically list Robert as Exeter's postmaster and record financial information associated with the office, providing additional confirmation that he remained in active federal service.

4. Location and Mail Service

A federal site-location report dated November 15, 1862, places the Exeter post office in the northeast quarter of Section 35, Township 4 North, Range 8 East. The surviving record does not establish whether the office operated from Robert's home, a store, or another building.

A mail schedule published in the Monroe Sentinel on October 30, 1861, shows mail service three times each week—Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Contemporary newspaper evidence places Exeter on a mail route connecting

the Monroe area toward Madison. Postal route numbers changed over time; surviving records document different route numbers for this corridor.

5. Historical Significance

Robert's postmastership was one of his longest documented public responsibilities. During nearly eleven years in the office, the United States passed through the Civil War and Exeter's residents depended on the postal system for letters, newspapers, official notices, and communication with people beyond the community. The surviving records establish Robert not only as a local officeholder but as a federal postmaster responsible for maintaining Exeter's connection to the national postal system.

6. Documentary Sources

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Summary. The documentary record establishes Robert Witter's service as postmaster of Exeter from October 6, 1856, until October 3, 1867, when John Porter was appointed his successor. Federal registers, postal regulations, site records, route records, and contemporary newspaper evidence provide a substantially fuller picture of the office than was available when the original appendix was prepared.

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[i] Grant County, Wisconsin, Mortgages, vol. 2, pp. 128–129, mortgage of Robert Witter and Lorana Witter to William Brown, August 22, 1843; digital images, FamilySearch.org. The instrument identifies Robert and his wife as residents of Green County, Wisconsin Territory.

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[xvi] Genesee County, New York, Deeds, vol. 36, pp. 229–230, Chester Witter and Emily Witter to Robert Witter, April 1, 1835; digital images, FamilySearch.org.

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[xix] Cayuga County, New York, Deeds, vol. U, pp. 465–466, Alvah Warden to Robert Witter, August 2, 1823, recorded September 10, 1823; Cayuga County, New York, Deeds, vol. FF, pp. 328–329, Lucretia Stevens, Horatio L. Stevens, and Samuel Stevens to Robert Witter, November 1, 1825; Cayuga County, New York, Deeds, vol. LL, p. 394, Asahel Fitch and Martha Fitch to Robert Witter, April 15, 1829; digital images, FamilySearch.org.

[xx] Cayuga County, New York, Deeds, vol. LL, p. 394, Asahel Fitch and Martha Fitch to Robert Witter, April 15, 1829; Cayuga County, New York, Mortgages, vol. R, p. 531, Robert Witter and Lorana Witter to William Close, April 15, 1829; digital images, FamilySearch.org.

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[xxii] Wyoming County, New York, Deeds, vol. 4, p. 241, Robert Witter and Lorana Witter to William Bainbridge, April 21, 1842; digital images, FamilySearch.org.

[xxiii] Author's compilation of Robert Witter land records from Cayuga, Genesee, and Wyoming Counties, New York, and Grant and Green Counties, Wisconsin. Thirty-six documented properties were identified; total acreage is estimated because several records involved town lots or properties for which acreage was not specified. See Appendix B for the compiled land analysis**.**

[xxiv] Green County, Wisconsin, Deeds, various volumes, transactions involving Robert Witter, 1843–1887; digital images, FamilySearch.org. Author's compilation identifies 24 deeds involving more than 1,000 acres, in addition to town lots and properties for which acreage was not specified.

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[xxxiii] United States General Land Office, patent to Robert Witter, Certificate No. 6481, west half of the southeast quarter of Section 7, Township 3 North, Range 8 East, 80 acres, Green County, Wisconsin, patent issued May 1, 1845; Mineral Point Land Office; digital image, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records.

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[xxxv] Green County, Wisconsin, Deeds, various volumes, transactions involving Robert Witter, including property in Monroe, Mount Pleasant, and Exeter; digital images, FamilySearch.org.

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[xxxvii] Green County, Wisconsin, Deeds, vol. 2, p. 109, Robert Witter and Lorana Witter to A. F. Stedman, February 27, 1845; digital image, FamilySearch.org; Butterfield, *History of Green County, Wisconsin* (Springfield, Ill.: Union Publishing Company, 1884), 999.

[xxxviii] Butterfield, *History of Green County, Wisconsin* (Springfield, Ill.: Union Publishing Company, 1884), 466.

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[xl] Wisconsin Territory, *Laws of the Territory of Wisconsin* (Madison: W. Wyman, 1841), 33, no. 8, sec. 4, "An Act Prescribing the Tenure of Office of Certain County Officers, and for Other Purposes."

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[xlii] Wisconsin, *The Revised Statutes of the State of Wisconsin* (Southport, Wis.: C. Latham Sholes, 1849), provisions governing town boards and town supervisors, including town accounts and highway responsibilities.

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About the Author

Daniel Witter lives in Everett, Washington, where he works as an Employment Consultant while pursuing a lifelong interest in American history and genealogy. For more than 30 years, he has researched the Witter family through original historical records, traveling throughout the Midwest and beyond in search of the people behind the names.

Rather than simply collecting dates and places, Dan seeks to understand the lives of his ancestors through the choices they made, the communities they helped build, and the records they left behind. His goal is to preserve their stories accurately and thoughtfully so that future generations will know not only who they were, but how they lived.

Robert Witter, the subject of this biography, was Daniel's fourth-great-grandfather.

Author's note:

In preparing this biography, I used ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence tool developed by OpenAI, as a research and editorial assistant. It assisted me in organizing and analyzing historical records, reviewing citations, developing and formatting the bibliography, editing portions of the narrative, and preparing several of the appendices from the research and source material I collected.

ChatGPT was also used to create several original illustrations appearing in this book. These images were generated from my prompts, historical research, and creative direction and are intended as artistic interpretations rather than documentary representations.

The underlying genealogical and historical research, selection and evaluation of sources, interpretation of Robert Witter's life, and final decisions concerning the contents of this book are my own. Historical claims are based on the documentary sources identified in the endnotes and bibliography rather than on the AI tool itself.